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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the cultural and historical context in which curriculum decisions are made in Australia and a comparison with educational assumptions in the United States is the purpose of this paper. Methodology is based on personal teaching experience and observation in Australia. Seven factors are identified upon which curricular decisions in Australia are based: (1) the influence of Australian cultural homogeneity on educational beliefs; (2) the highly condensed history of curricular change; (3) incomplete reform implementation; (4) demands on curricula for job preparation; (5) tension between egalitarian and elitist beliefs; (6) current political and economic pressures; and (7) the role of curriculum scholars. In recent decades Australian schools have changed faster than have the assumptions held by most Australians about education. The Australian dilemma differs from the American one in that Americans value education for its universal, intrinsic qualities, and Australians value education for extrinsic reasons. Australian support of education is based on a narrower, utilitarian, and directly politicized viewpoint. Unlike the culturally diverse American situation, Australian institutions are less resilient to challenges. (11 references) (LMI)

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# Assumptions Underlying Curriculum Decisions in Australia: An American Perspective

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## Introduction

In the first half of 1989 I had the pleasure of spending five months in Australia as a Fulbright Senior Scholar,[1] attempting to identify basic assumptions which underlie decisions about curricula in Australia and to compare them with underlying assumptions in the United States. During the five months I was hosted by Murdoch University and Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra). Headquartered for most of this time at the latter, I taught both undergraduate and graduate courses there for one semester and advised graduate students on their theses in curriculum. In accordance with the original plan for research, I visited Curtin University, the [Australian National] Curriculum Development Centre, James Cook University (Townsville Campus), the University of Queensland, the University of Tasmania, and Victoria College. I was able to arrange additional working visits to James Cook University (Cairns Campus), Brisbane College of Advanced Education, Macquarie University, the University of Sydney, Bond University, Monash University, Deakin University, two state departments of education, and a number of elementary and secondary schools. Essentially, I attempted to immerse myself as fully as possible in Australian culture. I was able to talk with many Australian curriculum scholars; read books, papers, and other documents on Australian curriculum not readily available in the United States; interview policy-makers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students; and lecture on curriculum issues to a variety of audiences. In this research I attempted to get beneath the ordinary surface rhetoric used to explain decisions about curricula, to unpack and to place within cultural and historical context the underlying assumptions actually used in Australia in making such decisions, and to compare them with underlying assumptions used in the United States.

I describe all this at the outset for two basic reasons. The first and more obvious reason is that readers should be aware of both the opportunities that were available to me and the limitations on those opportunities. The opportunities were plentiful, and in a five month immersion in such opportunities one can come to know a lot about another culture. In five months, however, one cannot come to know another culture completely, perhaps not even very well. So my understanding of Australia remains incomplete, and, as my title implies, my perspective on Australia remains an American[2] one, although in this paper I have done my best to

minimize misconceptions and misinformation. The second reason is that readers should be aware of the inherent limitations of the research itself. I have dignified my efforts by calling them "research," but there is nothing very systematic about this kind of naturalistic research. Basically, one heads out into the "field" hoping that one is as well prepared as possible as a participant observer, a scholar, and a reasonably sensitive human being and that chance does indeed favor the prepared mind. But in this kind of research there are no definite rules about what to look for and how to look, and there is no convenient stopping place. As much as one discovers about other people, about their history and culture, and about how they think, there is always more to learn. As true as the generalizations are which one begins to trust, there are always exceptions. Furthermore, in attempting to uncover the assumptions which underlie the surface rhetoric ordinarily used to explain or justify decisions about curricula in Australia and the United States, I have attempted to get at what I loosely refer to here as the "mythology" of each country, those ideas and stories through which a culture sometimes consciously but usually unconsciously embodies its collective values.

This task is fraught with problems, of course, for what people say they believe is not always what they do believe and not everyone believes the same things. Much speculation and interpretation are necessary, even about one's own culture. For instance, as someone who was born and raised in the United States and who has lived most of his life there, I am familiar with American mythology. I know how it has become part of my everyday consciousness, part of how I ordinarily perceive the world, but I also know enough not to believe it all. Over the years I have developed some sense about which national stories tell a lot of truth about Americans and which do not. Therefore, readers should be aware that what I report in this paper is based on not only what I observed in a public sense, but on my own personal speculations about what I observed means. What I report is my way of understanding what I experienced about curriculum decisions in Australia. It remains a perspective, my perspective, not necessarily someone else's truth, though I hope it might be useful to readers in refining their own perspectives in response.

## General Considerations

One academic source more than any other has shaped my perspective on

education in Australia, and most of my interpretive speculations about assumptions underlying curriculum decisions revolve around a central comparison of Australian and American cultures and mythologies.

The academic source is the book Assumptions Underlying Australian Education, by R. Freeman Butts (Butts, 1955), which I became aware for the first time shortly after my arrival in Australia. Butts, a fellow American sympathetic to progressive education, as am I, had thirty-five years before me undertaken a more general and far more extensive survey of Australian education than I was beginning. After having travelled throughout the entire country, visited hundreds of schools, and spoken with thousands of educators, Butts issued in his book a friendly but pointed assessment of Australian education. In short, Butts found in Australian schools almost nothing characteristic of progressive education, such as interactive or student-centered instruction based on individual needs, curricula based on social problems and group activities, or relationships between students and teachers or between teachers and administrators based on flexibility and individual initiative. Instead, he found schools to be driven almost entirely by tradition. They were highly formal, rigid, and elitist, catering to a small percentage of Australians and emphasizing the transmission of academic knowledge through drill and teacher-centered instruction. Underlying assumptions were consistent with such traditional education. Butts looked forward to the time when Australian schools would be much different.

But this description of Australian education in the 1950s, the accuracy of which I had no reason to doubt, was not at all like what I had come to expect of Australian schools from reading Curriculum Perspectives during the 1980s, nor was it at all like the schools I was both hearing about and seeing early in 1989, schools which mixed both progressive and traditional characteristics in as bewildering a variety of ways as did schools in the United States. So Australian schools had become much different, and very rapidly and dramatically, too. Likely underlying assumptions about curricula had changed as much. But how? And why? Reading Butts' book early in my visit, therefore, helped me see my task as understanding how Australian schools in less than thirty-five years had changed as much as American schools had changed in perhaps the last one hundred years. Had changes in underlying assumptions about curricula driven or followed the more general changes in Australian schools?

The central comparison between Australia and the United States which I have found most helpful in working toward answers to such questions deals with seeming paradoxes within the cultures of both countries. Americans seem to think of themselves as individualists; in fact, much of the national mythology of the United States celebrates individual heros and their physical deeds, such as taming the frontier, or their spiritual deeds, such as standing firm for what they believe in in the face of opposition. Australians-- albeit, with a certain ambivalence-- seem more deferential to authority, even though a conspicuous part of their national mythology celebrates defiance of authority. At least this is the way things seem on the surface. But as an Australian friend who has lived in the United States suggested to me, beneath the surface Americans are conformists and Australians are individualists; deep down in their hearts most Americans want to be like most other Americans, but most Australians do not want to be like most other Australians. Now the truthfulness of this generalization can be endlessly debated, but at least it opens up some general interpretations of Americans, Australians, and the histories of their national cultures which may be germane to more specific issues concerning how each country uses its schools.

In many ways both countries are alike. Both originated as British colonies, share a common language and a similar (though not identical) democratic political system, emphasize material progress, and have made a mess of their treatment of the original and indigenous peoples of the lands they now occupy. There are many differences, however. The United States now stands on nearly four hundred years of history of accommodating the cultural and religious diversity of people newly arrived first from many countries of Europe and then from many parts of the world. Two hundred years ago, in the face of growing British influence in North America, Americans rebelled violently, achieved political independence, and used an ideology born of the European Enlightenment to establish the United States and to begin developing a distinctively national identity. The new American nation certainly cherished such individualistic values as liberty and independence, but life on the edge of the wilderness still demanded cooperation and much attention to material concerns. In the nineteenth century there was a strong tendency to reject things European, and the United States developed its own political and social institutions and an egalitarian, utilitarian outlook (including a certain anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism), all of which reflected the diversity of American

origins. Still, in growing away from European antecedents, Americans continued to gaze with some envy at Europe and the high culture which the United States had not yet attained. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, most of the approximately 250 million current Americans are no longer ambivalent about themselves or Europe. They like to wave the national flag but are not very introspective about the nation itself.

In contrast, Australia now stands on just two hundred years of history and less than one hundred years as a nation. Established originally as a series of penal colonies in a place extremely remote from the culture of Europe, Australia had relatively few early settlers who arrived for ideological or political reasons or who were not natives of the British Isles. Given the necessities born of geographical isolation and the predilections born of cultural homogeneity, Australia has retained its ties with "Mother England" and remains a member of the British Commonwealth, although Australians often wonder if their own culture has progressed substantially beyond that of a colony and attained the standards of older cultures of Europe or even the United States. Still, the people of Australia generally focus their lives around material concerns, which they take a matter-of-fact attitude toward dealing with. They are more highly egalitarian than Americans, and, indeed, divisions among social classes are neither as deep nor as historically ingrained as they are in the United States. Australia functions largely as a social and political meritocracy, although many citizens hold anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian attitudes similar to those in the United States and remain suspicious-- perhaps even resentful-- of other Australians who too much exceed prevailing norms. The prevailing social norms, however, are still those of a homogeneous majority, for only since World War II has Australia sufficiently broadened immigration policies to begin becoming a multi-cultural nation, and the story of how it deals with cultural diversity is just beginning to be told. Given the relatively brief history of Australia, its origins as a penal colony, its geographical isolation, and its recent development into a culturally diverse nation, the approximately 16 million current Australians often seem to wonder about their national identity.

My Australian friend may be right: Americans are the conformists who want to be like other Americans and Australians are the individualists who do not want to be like other Australians. If so, then I take the principal reasons to be rooted in the different cultural histories I have so briefly

touched upon. Basically, America from its beginnings developed amid cultural diversity; the diversity was always there, and American political, social, economic, and educational institutions grew up as a response to diversity and reflecting diversity. These institutions evolved away from British antecedents and permitted different people to retain their own identities and still participate in an egalitarian society, often by finding compromises that effectively accommodated ideological and personal differences within the pursuit of the common good. In the United States individualism has always been important, but learning how to be a member of the larger society has been even more important. The United States has been an on-going invention, not a stable inheritance.

In contrast, Australia may have inherited more and thus been able to invent itself less. Until recently there has been relatively little cultural diversity, and, I believe, many Australian institutions have not evolved very far away from the British antecedents they have been modeled on. Hence, many of the institutions Australia has inherited from Britain are more functional in the traditional, class-based society in which they originated than in the egalitarian and homogeneous society Australia has been and the changing and diverse society it is becoming. These institutions also encourage a deference to authority which rests a lot more comfortably within the British soul than within the Australian soul, I strongly suspect. In Australia, therefore, conforming to the larger society may always have been important for these and other reasons, but deep down inside many Australians have not always wanted to do so. Thus, there appears to be an uncomfortableness endemic to being an Australian that has less to do with doubts about the quality of Australian culture itself than with the mismatch between certain confining cultural norms and certain visceral personal aspirations. When Americans are similarly uncomfortable, it is for a different reason; it is because they feel unsure they are completely American. That uncomfortableness is endemic because within the diversity of the United States nobody has ever really known what being an American means. In Australia, where cultural diversity is new, most of the national experience in dealing with diversity is still in the future. I suggest that as this national experience gradually unfolds, uncertainty about what it means to be an Australian will slowly increase but the current uncomfortableness endemic to being an Australian will slowly decrease.

Consider the federal governments of both countries as examples

reflecting national cultural differences and different assumptions about education. Both federal governments consist of executive, judicial, and legislative branches, the legislative branch of each being two-chambered, comprised of a house of representatives and a senate. The Australian Constitution is modeled in part on the United States Constitution, and legal control of schools in both countries is ceded by their constitutions to the states. The Australian system of government, however, is a parliamentary system, not a congressional system. In Australia the leader of the executive branch, the Prime Minister, is the leader of the political party (or coalition of parties) holding the majority in the House of Representatives, and this majority is usually maintained until the program of the ruling party loses support among the people. Elections may then be called and with them the possibility of rule by a new majority party with a new leader. In the United States the President and members of Congress are elected separately and for fixed terms. Americans and Australians are often puzzled by the differences between the two federal systems. The Australian system encourages compromise and cooperation within the ranks of the two principal parties (though factionalism and infighting may be more usual), but very little compromise and cooperation between parties. Indeed, perhaps the most interesting comment on the United States I heard while in Australia was, "I don't see how the American government can function when the President is a member of one political party and the majority in Congress is held by the other party." The explanation lies, of course, in the centralizing pressures on both American political parties within a diverse society and the necessity of practicing the art of political compromise, even if historically this art has not always been practiced well.

In a recent review of a book comparing educational policy in Australia and the United States, Geraldine Jonçich Clifford (Clifford, 1989) analyzes the current social, economic, and political scene in Australia. She begins with an explanation of "No worries!", a phrase often used by Australians. "No worries!" carries a multitude of meanings and captures a certain national insouciance, even when Australians know they have something to worry about. Clifford suggests that beneath the surface Australians have much to worry about, perhaps about as much as Americans do. She emphasizes a broad range of problems which both countries have in common, ending with a view, which I share, of the influence of the federal government in Australia on education there. Unlike the United States, in Australia more than a quarter of primary and secondary students attend non-government (private)

schools, and the federal government provides substantial amounts of financial aid to such schools.[3] Both tangible and moral support for state (public) schools has been declining during the 1980s, even while the avowedly liberal Labor party of Prime Minister Bob Hawke has controlled the federal government. Clifford contends that the educational policies of the Labor government have been offered in the guise of promoting equity but have actually pitted different interest groups against each other and increased frustration and institutional inertia by taking a highly conservative "econocratic" approach to education, an educational Darwinism perhaps created as much in Reagan's Washington and Thatcher's Westminster as in Hawke's Canberra. Labor policies have decreased support for state schools while presuming to improve their productivity through the familiar but self-contradictory litany of accountability, rational management, increased central control, greater uniformity, and-- yes-- privatization. She notes that within Australian society such ironies about education now abound and concludes with the decidedly gloomy summation: "Not an inspiring sight; indeed, it is abso-bloody-lutely awful!"

Beyond doubt, Clifford's analysis of the muddled social and educational scene in Australia could be applied without much modification to the similarly muddled scene in the United States. Why, then, do I, as a fellow American, feel as I sense Clifford feels, that despite the similarities in these scenes and even if some appropriate Americanism were substituted for the word "bloody" in an attempt to make her summation equally fitting for the American scene, the gloom of that summation would not apply nearly as pervasively to the United States? What makes the sight of education in Australia more deeply gloomy and more awful still? I have tried to begin suggesting my answer in the general considerations I have described above and will attempt to elaborate that answer in the specific themes and assumptions I describe below. In general, however, that answer is because I as an American see Australian education as more vulnerable to the wrong kinds of forces for change due, first, to the historical mismatch between the cultural institutions and norms Australia has inherited from Britain and the personal aspirations of individual Australians and, second, to the greater politicization of Australian education resulting in part from this mismatch, particularly in regard to the policies of the federal government.

## Educational Themes and Curricular Assumptions

I elaborate these general considerations by focusing them on seven themes I have found helpful to my understanding of the relationship between education and the national mythology of Australia. In so doing, I make some direct comparisons with the United States but attempt to identify what seem to me to be the most fundamental assumptions which curricular decisions in Australia are actually based upon. These themes are the influence of the relative cultural homogeneity of Australia on beliefs about what education is for, the highly condensed history of curricular change in Australia, the relatively incomplete implementation of curriculum reforms, the demands on curricula for credentialing and preparation for employment, the tension between egalitarian and elitist beliefs, the current political and economic pressures on school curricula, and the role of curriculum scholars in broadening traditional practice.

(1) *The influence of the relative cultural homogeneity of Australia on beliefs about what education is for.* This theme I have touched on above. While there are many similarities between the views of Australians and Americans, my contention is that partly due to the development of Australian educational institutions from British antecedents and the familiarity of many Australians with British culture, Australians tend to hold a more homogenous view of what schools are for. In general, Australians tend to see only two purposes for education, an academic purpose, which parallels the purpose of education for the British elite, and a vocational purpose, which parallels the purpose of education for the British masses. Most curricular decisions in Australia, I believe, are based on the underlying assumption that education serves one or both of these two purposes. Recent federal policies taking the "econocratic" approach toward education have tended to compress these two purposes into one, encouraging less diverse and more stereotyped thinking about education.

While Americans widely accept these two basic purposes for education, they seem more inclined than Australians to see schools as also including the goals of personal growth and social reform. The policies of the federal government or the stereotypical rhetoric they encourage are relatively powerless to reduce the breadth of purposes which American culture has demanded that schools strive for. Americans often are collectively undecided about what kind of social changes mass education

should bring about, and the individual personal development which they believe schools should foster may still be constrained by social pressures toward conformity; however, beneath the surface rhetoric in the United States lies a deep-seated and thoroughly ingrained cultural belief that schools should be all things to all people. To me similar beliefs held by some Australians seem less widespread and less deeply rooted; hence, efforts to include within Australian schools a variety of purposes seem more fragile.

(2) *The highly condensed history of curriculum change in Australia.* Efforts to expand the purposes of Australian education are relatively recent, and prior to the 1960s there was essentially one traditional pattern for curricula in all Australian schools. Curricula reflected the assumption that schools should transmit a more-or-less fixed body of academic knowledge, with practical, skill-oriented options available for the less academically able or less academically inclined students who did not drop out of school at early ages. Curricula were centrally controlled, and state schools included many of the same practices of elite non-government schools, using, for instance, selective admissions policies.

This pattern, which prevailed through the 1950s, can be seen as the place of departure for a cycle of Australian curriculum reform.[4] In the 1960s changes of the kind which Butts was sympathetic toward began. The traditional academic core curriculum of state schools started to give way to curricula that were more broad, more socially oriented, and more determined by student choice. In the 1970s these changes led into a period of school based curriculum development but at the same time a period in which both curricular issues and social issues became politicized. This politicization, coupled with economic hard times, led in the 1980s to changes toward vocational curricula that focused on job skills and employment opportunities. By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, national efforts for curriculum reform had swung back in the direction of a standardized, centrally controlled, core curriculum which emphasized academic and vocational "basics." The point of arrival in the 1990s of this cycle of curriculum reform seems very much like the point of departure in the 1950s, even if the average age of those leaving school has risen and even if some other non-superficial and potentially permanent changes in the character schooling-- much like the influence of progressive education in the United States-- have been incorporated into the structure of Australian education.

Within thirty years there have thus been four or five major waves of change widely advocated for Australian curricula, with corresponding changes occurring particularly in state schools. These waves correspond roughly to pressures for change which have occurred more gradually in the United States, over perhaps the last eighty to one hundred years. Although some of these curricular changes have been driven by major demographic and sociological changes in both countries, the longer history of change in the United States has included the influence of distinct social movements formed around grass-roots acceptance of new educational ideas, while the shorter history in Australia has less included the influence of long-term movements and more the influence of direct interventions by state and federal governments. In fact, Duignan suggests that despite the illusion of school based curriculum control in the 1970s and 1980s, in most Australian states curriculum has always remained centrally determined (Duignan, 1988). So what, then, has been left behind by the rapid cycle of curriculum reform in Australia? No doubt many things, but possibly nothing more important than the underlying assumption among Australian educators and citizens alike that a "normal" state of affairs is for curricula to be constantly politicized and for changes to occur not primarily gradually, through thoughtful, on-going debate and assessment, particularly by those involved in the schools, but in more immediate reaction to pressures brought to bear by those in positions of central authority.

(3) *The relatively incomplete implementation of modern curriculum reforms in Australia.* This theme follows from the previous theme. While questions about the completeness of American curriculum reforms can also be raised, of course, changes in the United States have generally been more evolutionary and thus gradually internalized by educators and citizens, while changes in Australia have been more short lived and the result of brief reform movements often directed by non-educators. Writing about this situation in 1979, in the midst of the cycle of rapid Australian curriculum reforms, Musgrave concluded that Australian education had always been derivative and eclectic, originally because of its colonial heritage, but also because of the tight control exerted by state departments and the importation of ideas from Britain and North America which did not comfortably fit within Australian culture nor were well understood by Australians (Musgrave, 1979). For example, the inevitable distortions of John Dewey's ideas which occurred in the United States in translating them into progressive educational practice were bound to be magnified and new

distortions created in attempting to import progressivism rapidly into Australia and establish it as a basis for curriculum change. Therefore, in Australia there has simply been less opportunity than in the United States for one wave of reform to actually shape curricula before the arrival of a new wave of reform. Given this recent history of incomplete implementation of rapid reforms in Australia, an underlying assumption may be that despite the outward appearance of fundamental changes, curricula tend to revert back to their traditional pre-1960s form and reflect the basically utilitarian views of Australian culture. If so, then the creation of this assumption as a by-product of the reform efforts of recent decades may make fundamental curriculum reforms more difficult in the future.

(4) *The demands on curricula for credentialling and preparation for employment.* Historically in Australia-- far more than in the United States-- both vocational and academic curricula have reflected utilitarian cultural views and have thus been expected to serve vocational ends. Cleverly and Lawry suggest that beginning in the 1890s secondary education in Australia began to oscillate between extreme emphasis on either vocational education or academic education, and at the turn of the century high schools split into two streams: technical high schools called "schools of utility" and formal high schools called "schools of culture." Institutions in both streams, however, were career oriented. Technical high schools emphasized the teaching of vocational skills through practical, hands-on curricula, and their students were encouraged to enter apprenticeships, the army, or similar non-professional occupations. Formal high schools emphasized the transmission of academic knowledge through a traditional academic curriculum, and their students were expected to enter universities and eventually the professions. These two streams were the norm in Australian secondary education until the 1960s and 1970s, when comprehensive high schools with some characteristics of progressive education were introduced on a large scale. (Cleverly and Lawry, 1972) Even so, there still seems to be considerable doubt in Australian minds about the desirability of comprehensive secondary education. For instance, Connell, et al., suggest that a major curricular conflict of the 1980s focused on vocational education versus traditional academic education. This conflict, which is still going on, is rooted in the social and cultural changes in Australia in recent decades and represents a threat to the permanence of comprehensive education. These authors see the current pressure on schools to return to "basics" and an academic curriculum, which is demonstrated by

increasing enrollments in private schools and loss of favor for progressive schools, as a symptom of how the demand for "credentialling" in Australian society tends to reduce the purposes of secondary education to providing admission to tertiary (higher) educational institutions which themselves provide vocational preparation for a small, elite segment of the overall population (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett, 1982).

In contrast, comprehensive secondary education developed in the United States much earlier in the twentieth century due in part to the American cultural belief that everyone should have as much education as possible. In the United States there have been more opportunities for non-elite and non-academically oriented secondary students to go on to colleges and universities; hence, in the United States secondary curricula have been more broad and less directly associated with specific vocations or careers. Currently in Australia there is still a strong cultural expectation that school programs should be ultimately directed toward placing students in clearly defined jobs in a rationally ordered society, whether those jobs are professional or blue collar. In fact, Australians change jobs less frequently during their working lives than do Americans and employers in Australia use school credentials far more directly in hiring. Despite some differences in curricula among Australian states, an important function of secondary education is providing uniform credentials which can be used nationwide either for immediate entry into a vocation or for admission into the government run and paid for,[5] uniform system of tertiary education. Places for students in Australian tertiary institutions are limited and admission is competitive, based largely on performance in secondary education. In this respect, Australian tertiary education is far more like higher education in Britain than in the United States, where the number of places is highly elastic and virtually anyone completing secondary education can attend, despite the fact that the 35% of Australians now obtaining some tertiary education falls roughly halfway between the 15% of Britains and the nearly 60% of Americans.[6] Still another difference is that students in Australian universities tend to launch more directly into career training, even in academic areas like philosophy or physics, unlike students in American universities, where curricula are usually more comprehensive, including more courses devoted to general education. When sufficient jobs are not available for those with proper educational qualifications-- even in philosophy or physics-- Australians are more like Britains in complaining that the duty of the federal government is to create the right number of jobs

for those properly qualified, and unlike Americans, who are more inclined to see the difficulty as caused by market forces and to seek out employment through entrepreneurial means.

There is little doubt that Australians assume even more quickly than Americans that curricula should lead directly to tangible vocational ends, rather than leading to general understanding or being a source of value in themselves.

(5) *The tension between egalitarian and elitist beliefs.* Both Australian and American societies are built on democratic beliefs and contain anti-authoritarian, anti-intellectual tendencies which push them toward egalitarianism. Each society thus sees curricula as serving egalitarian ends. Nonetheless, each society also functions as a meritocracy and holds its own beliefs about how education should or should not promote the elitism which meritocracy is based upon. In terms of the distribution of wealth among its citizens, Australia is more egalitarian than the United States. Australians far more than Americans frown on large differences in incomes of citizens but also use schools more directly for credentialling for participation in its economic system and even for leadership in its political system. Australian schools, therefore, tend to sort its citizens into elite and non-elite groups within a functional meritocracy, although Australian attitudes tend to minimize differential rewards in money or status between individuals or groups. In the United States, large differences in income are not only tolerated but encouraged. Such differences are often seen as the result of individual merit, which can be increased through education but which still depends largely on personal characteristics. Americans have been more successful than Australians in providing extended schooling and convincing students to "stay in school" for the economic and personal benefits education creates. In thus providing more nearly universal education, Americans have provided school credentials in a more egalitarian way and have used curricula less as a means for elite participation in society. On the other hand, Australians have been more successful in creating egalitarian rewards for all citizens despite the elite, meritocratic participation in society caused by less universal education.

The opening of Bond University, Australia's first privately financed and controlled tertiary institution, provides an instructive example. Bond is a university of commerce, management, and applied technology, which like

other Australian universities devotes very little of its curricula to general education. When Bond began classes in May, 1989, it was accused by protestors of substituting financial elitism for academic elitism; that is, in accepting Australian students who could afford to pay high fees and in training and credentialling them to get high paying jobs, Bond was potentially displacing from rightful participation in society a portion of less affluent but more academically qualified Australian students who had competitively "earned" admission to limited places in government tertiary institutions.[7] Bond's answer to this charge was that under the traditional system in Australia wealthy parents at great expense already send their children to elite private schools which can more-or-less guarantee admission to government financed places in tertiary institutions and eventual entry into the upper echelons of jobs. The real issue is not elitism versus non-elitism, then; it is who is buying what kind of elitism at what level.

Such tensions between egalitarian and elitist beliefs are another symptom of the relative newness of cultural diversity in Australia, I think, and the struggle to move away from British antecedents. Assumptions underlying curriculum decisions reflect the reality that Australian schools-- much as British schools-- do serve as sorting agencies in a competitive society, albeit in Britain more of the sorting is done along existing social class lines and in Australia more is done on the basis of individual merit. Australia's strongly egalitarian culture rejects the idea of elitism based on social class or money but seems not yet to have digested the idea that there is still another alternative to using schools to promote an elitism of meritocracy based on academic achievement. This alternative is to use schools to promote universal elitism.[8] Under universal elitism everyone is assumed to be able to benefit from as much education as possible; therefore, the responsibility of government is to provide as much education as possible. Doing so would include encouraging both private and state schools and de-emphasizing the credentialing function of all schools. Under universal elitism Bond University would then become one of many different kinds of institutions contributing to a healthy diversity. Steps in that direction would also mean reducing the current cultural tension between egalitarian and elitist beliefs that underlie many curriculum decisions.

(6) *The current political and economic pressures on school curricula.* During the 1980s curricula in both Australia and the United States have been

widely perceived as serving the predominate end of national economic rejuvenation. Despite such apparently similar pressures for uniformity, in Australia curricula are actually far more subject to being shaped by direct pressures from political leaders than are curricula in the United States. In both countries states legally control schools within their boundaries, but central control has been far more an historical fact of life in Australia, where early efforts to establish local control of schools failed because of sparse populations and extreme distances. In the United States, there is a long history of local control of public schools delegated by the states, and even though local control is gradually eroding, there remains a healthy legacy of grass-roots identification with and support for local schools. Furthermore, in Australia, where each political party is more likely to present a united front on policies, the ruling party can more readily translate its educational policies into uniform programs within the states through political and bureaucratic means. In the United States, uniform policies or programs are likely only when a majority of the overall population supports them. Thus, to control such public institutions as schools politicians must usually resort to general persuasion, not specific coercion.

To illustrate these points, consider the talk about national curricula which has recently surfaced in both countries. In the United States all it is now or is likely to be in the future is talk, for only people extremely naive or egregiously ignorant of American social history would actually expect the establishment of anything like a national curriculum. The American people have always wanted schools to be all things to all people, not the same thing to all people, and they simply would not stand for the kind of uniformity a national curriculum demands. So the recent talk is best understood as primarily a way of venting frustration about national economic problems and problems as a declining global power and letting politicians appear to be doing something constructive about these problems without actually doing anything controversial. Ironically, such talk might still generate some slightly greater curriculum uniformity across the nation if some of the fifty states pass similar laws requiring schools to teach certain subjects, but even these laws are likely to be so general that the new requirements would be for subjects which virtually all schools are teaching anyway and that much of the actual curricular content of these subjects would still be left to local educators.

In Australia, talk about a national curriculum has a much more

coercive edge, especially since it has been accompanied by threats from Canberra of economic sanctions against states that do not go along with such federal policies. Australian history also enters in, for economic problems in Australia are currently more severe than similar problems in the United States and have been attributed at least in part to wide oscillations in recent decades in federal policies, including policies about education. In the early 1970s a socially-oriented Labor government took a reformist attitude toward much of Australian life, encouraged participatory democracy, adopted an influential rationale for school based curriculum development that emphasized equality of educational outcomes, and provided major funding increases in support of such efforts to decentralize control of curricula. In 1975, however, the return of a conservative government reversed these policies. In part because of high unemployment, new policies emphasized vocational curricula in order to equip students with practical skills for the labor market, and even in the 1980s, when Labor regained control of the federal government, support for school based curriculum development and the social reforms of the early 1970s continued to dwindle. For instance, in 1985 the federal government embraced a national report which defined schools strictly in terms of an economic rationality, and subsequent educational policies have continued to emphasize narrowly economic reasons for curricula.

The point of this history is that there is reason to take seriously talk of a national curriculum in Australia, for curricula are directly subject to real political and economic pressures and potentially coercive central controls. Therefore, another assumption underlying curriculum decisions in Australia seems to be that changes in curricula lead directly to changes in society. On the surface this assumptions appears to be similar to the American belief in using education to promote social reforms, but beneath the surface the American belief holds that significant social changes are at best an incidental and unplanned result of educating a large number of individuals well. In Australia, people seem more ready to accept uniformity in curricula because they are more tolerant of government efforts to use schools directly as a means of social engineering, particularly for economic reasons.

As a result of political and economic pressures and this underlying assumption in Australia, not only are curricula themselves constrained, but discourse about them is similarly constrained. This is not a very heartening

picture, for within it there appears to be little opportunity to break out into new ways of thinking about curriculum problems. In a recent review of curriculum research Musgrave notes this difficulty and suggests that researchers and scholars will have to find fresh ways to enlighten curriculum policy and practice without governmental support (Musgrave, 1987).

(7) *The role of curriculum scholars in broadening traditional practice.* Almost a decade earlier, at the end of the 1970s, Musgrave had described a more heartening picture. He believed that curriculum development in Australia had been derivative in the past in part because it lacked "local intellectual prophets," but that it was about to enter an era in which appropriately Australian ideas might come into their own (Musgrave, 1979). Klohr, an American writing in the first issue of Curriculum Perspectives in 1980, concurred with Musgrave and suggested that characteristics of a somewhat parallel and emerging movement in the United States might also become characteristics of an originally Australian movement among curriculum scholars and intellectuals. This movement might then broaden curriculum development in Australia and make it less derivative. The characteristics Klohr identified were trans-cultural; their presence was an indication of the freeing of a culture's creative potential in redefining curriculum development. Among them were a holistic view of people in relation to nature, the individual as constructor of knowledge and creator of culture, emphasis on personal experience and personal liberty, diversity and pluralism as both ends and means, new understanding of the political and social context of practice, and development of new forms of meaning (Klohr, 1980). Given this optimistic picture at the beginning of the 1980s, have Australian curriculum scholars in the last decade actually been able to broaden traditional practice? Will they be able to do so in the future?

Neither the answers to such questions nor underlying Australian assumptions about them are particularly clear. In Australia the field of curriculum studies is now as advanced as anywhere in the world. The 1980s have been a great leap forward in many respects. Curriculum scholars tend to be located in universities and in other positions which influence teacher education and school practice. With one-fifteenth the population of the United States and more centralizing social tendencies, Australia appears to be in a more favorable position for having curriculum scholars exert a beneficial influence over future curriculum changes. In contrast, in the

United States curriculum scholars have always been marginalized and unable to exert much influence over the diverse but amorphous, the broad but pragmatic system of education. Australians may be more ready than Americans to assume that curriculum development should be guided by curriculum scholars rather than by presumed experts from outside fields or by politicians, administrators, or teachers who constantly reinvent the same solutions to meet ad hoc demands.

Among Australian curriculum scholars there seem to be two general approaches to this opportunity. The first approach is taken by those scholars who choose to work within the parameters of the traditional system of education and attempt to ameliorate the way it functions. The first approach is exemplified by a recent article by Boomer (Boomer, 1988). This article takes a cautious approach to the political pressures of the late-1980s for the development of national curriculum frameworks (guides that would create uniformity within various subject matters and perhaps lay the basis for a national curriculum). Acknowledging that these pressures have arisen largely from the push by the federal government to link education with economic productivity, Boomer nonetheless attempts to reconcile such pressures with gains in creativity and the professional development of teachers made during the era of school based curriculum development. Personally, I find this approach disheartening, for it seems to me a giving in to a reversal of the conditions which made possible in the first place the gains Boomer values. It thus seems to me a giving in to political and social demands on education which must be resisted if real and constructive changes are to occur in the future. Therefore, I find far more heartening the second approach.

The second approach is taken by those scholars who choose to challenge the traditional system through the kind of intellectual prophesy which I think Musgrave had in mind in 1979 and which I think necessary for the creation of distinctly and indigenously Australian curriculum development. This approach is exemplified by recent papers by Kemmis and by Gough. Kemmis (Kemmis, 1989) develops an historical critique of the traditional system of education and the traditional pressures for conformity which have accompanied it. He thinks that from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, curriculum specialists in Australia came more and more to play the constructive roles of "organic intellectuals" in schools and communities, articulating and legitimating teachers' and parents' aspirations, and

"transformative intellectuals" within academia, countering reactionary social trends; but in the later 1980s this situation largely ended because of demands for centralization and rationalization. He concludes that curriculum scholars need to mount a new critique of current trends from which to reconstruct "the educational values and traditions which have made education for emancipation the mark of a civilised society." (p. 9) Gough (Gough, 1989) suggests some themes and ideas around which such reconstruction might be accomplished in Australia, raising a plea for Australian history and from it the development of a distinctively Australian curriculum mythology which breaks away from the trader-miner-economic entrepreneur myth of society many Australians hold and moves toward an Aboriginal one.

Which of these two approaches will predominate in the 1990s seems to me to depend on the extent to which Australian curriculum scholars can retain their collective independence while at the same time influencing the traditional educational system. Being co-opted by the system and resisting the system are mutually exclusive.

## Conclusions

In recent decades schools in Australia have changed faster than have the underlying assumptions most Australians hold about education. This leaves not only curriculum scholars but the whole society with a dilemma. In many ways this dilemma is much like the dilemma which the United States has long struggled with during the twentieth century in expanding its own collective notions about how schools could break away from traditional education and incorporate the modern ideas and practices of progressive education. Both dilemmas extend beyond curriculum decisions themselves, for they deal with fundamental issues about mass education and democratic culture. Although the dilemmas are similar, for the reasons I have tried to identify above the Australian dilemma runs deeper.

Does the public in Australia have the same cultural reservoir of understanding of, respect for, and desire for universal, democratic education that the American public does, despite the current inarticulateness and the ever-present anti-intellectualism in the United States? In the United States education is almost seen as a "right" and the nation has made a strong,

long-range commitment to attempting to provide everyone with as much education as possible. Education has become culturally accepted for many of its intrinsic qualities, as a universal good. In Australia the cultural experiment with universal, democratic education is relatively new and seems not yet well understood nor well digested by the culture as a whole; hence, Australian society seems more inclined to value education for extrinsic reasons (for instance, its direct influence on the economy) and is perhaps more prone to abandon commitment to education and a truly democratic experience with it as external forces and influences change.

In short, in Australia support for education seems less deep-rooted than in the United States, based more on a narrower, utilitarian view of what schools are for, and more directly politicized. The assumptions underlying curriculum decisions in Australia today often seem contradictory to the curriculum reforms Australia has undertaken in the short time since R. Freeman Butts' visit. Has Australia a sufficient cultural reservoir of public understanding of these reforms to sustain them now and in the future, in what seem to be less temperate times? The United States insulates itself from its own mistakes through its great size and a certain resiliency developed out of its cultural traditions reflecting diversity. At least I as an American have lived long enough with American institutions to understand the resiliency within them even when outwardly they are troubled, even during the times when they are being assaulted by Americans themselves. Australia seems not yet to have developed such insulation for its own mistakes and therefore seems more vulnerable to itself. Or perhaps my brief living with Australian institutions has not been long enough for me to understand the inward resiliency that is there. I hope that is the case. Australians themselves are certainly a friendly, fair-minded, and resilient lot. "No worries!" for them, except when they need to. In the meantime, I wonder and I can't help worrying on their behalf, and for the same reasons for which I think Geraldine Jonçich Clifford worries, too. What the result of all this will be only time will tell.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank the Australian-American Educational Foundation in Canberra and the United States Information Agency and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars in Washington for their support.

2. I use the term "American" in this paper as a convenient way of referring to the United States of America and its people and do not intend this use to imply that other countries and peoples in North and South America are not also American.

3. Clifford cites a prestigious church-related school which in 1982 received 27% of its budget from state and federal subsidies and points out that government subsidies to such socially elite and well-endowed schools lower the fees they charge to parents, increase the drift of middle class students from state (public) schools, and erode public support and the funding base for state schools.

4. I am indebted to Dr. Geoffrey Burkhardt of the University of Canberra for first pointing out this cycle to me.

5. In recent years the policy of the federal government in Australia has been to pass on an increasing portion of the costs of tertiary education to students. This policy is a source of considerable controversy. Even so, the current costs to students of tertiary education in Australia is only a fraction of costs to students of higher education in the United States.

6. These percentages, especially for Australia and the United States, can vary considerably depending on how one counts institutions other than colleges and universities, particularly "TAFE" (Trade and Further Education) instituions in Australia, which roughly correspond to junior colleges in the United States but are perhaps more accurately characterized as government run vocational schools.

7. Compounding Bond's problem were the facts that at its opening its private financing was so insufficient and it was applying to the Queensland government for a major loan, and that other private tertiary institutions which might also seek government financial support were planned for

opening in several places in Australia.

8. For a discussion of universal elitism, see Harry S. Broudy: The Real World of the Public Schools (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

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